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Sarah Dillon

“It’s a Question of Words, Therefore”: Becoming-Animal in Michel Faber’s *Under the Skin*

Introduction. *Under the Skin* (2000) is the horrifying best-selling first novel of the Dutch-born, Australian-raised, Scottish-resident, contemporary novelist Michel Faber. Marketed as a mainstream text, *Under the Skin* can be read in the context of a number of other contemporary mainstream works interested in the relationships between human and nonhuman animals, such as J.M. Coetzee’s *The Lives of Animals* (1999), Marie Darrieussecq’s *Pig Tales: A Novel of Lust and Transformation* (1997), Richard Flanagan’s *Gould’s Book of Fish* (2001), Yann Martel’s *The Life of Pi* (2002), and Will Self’s *Great Apes* (1997). It also shares affinities with such non-sf texts as Jack London’s *The Call of the Wild* (1903), Dante’s *Inferno*, and Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. Despite Faber’s denial, however, *Under the Skin*, with its story of an alien species farming humans on Earth for meat, is clearly science fiction.¹ It could thus also be read in the context of the tradition of sf that develops out of H.G. Wells’s *The Island of Dr. Moreau* (1896). *Under the Skin* bears remarkable affinities with this text in the sense that, in both, metamorphoses are effected by surgery rather than by magic or accident. Both texts are also interested in how altered bodies move backwards and forwards across the boundary between human and nonhuman animal and how physical alterations effect psychological ones. In this sense, *Under the Skin* takes its place in a long line of sf texts and characters developed out of Wells’s work, from Cordwainer Smith’s Underpeople to the posthuman concern with species metamorphosis in works such as Bruce Sterling’s *Schismatrix* (1985).²

In this essay, I am interested in *Under the Skin* in the context of the question of what role literature can play in extending our understanding of the relation between the human and nonhuman animal. In the introduction to *Zoontologies: The Question of the Animal* (2003), Cary Wolfe observes that

in the philosophical tradition questions of the relationship between humans, animals, and the problem of ethics have turned decisively on the problem of cognition and, even more specifically in the modern and postmodern period, on the capacity for language. It would be overly simple, but not wrong, to say that the basic formula here has been: no language, no subjectivity. This equation has in turn traditionally laid to rest, more or less, the question of our ethical obligation to creatures who, because they lack language, lack the ability to “respond”... in that two-way exchange (so the story goes) that is crucial to the ethical relationship. (xv-xvi)

In *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, Jacques Derrida confirms Wolfe’s summary of the Western philosophical tradition on the question of the animal, arguing that philosophers including Aristotle, Descartes, Kant, Heidegger, Lacan, and Levinas have all maintained the thesis that the animal cannot think, reason, or speak.

"Logocentrism is first of all," Derrida states, "a thesis regarding the animal, the animal deprived of the *logos*, deprived of the *can-have-the-logos*" (27; emphasis in original). In fact, for Derrida, the question of the animal lies at the heart of the difference between philosophy and literature: "For thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry. There you have a thesis: it is what philosophy has, essentially, had to deprive itself of. It is the difference between philosophical knowledge and poetic thinking" (7).

In this respect, Derrida's views are echoed by the contributors to the July 2008 special issue of *SFS* focusing on Animal Studies, all of whom maintain that literature—and science fiction in particular—serves as a privileged site for the interrogation of the relationship between human and nonhuman animals. In the editor's introduction, Sherryl Vint recalls J.M. Coetzee's belief that "literature, by enabling us to imagine the world from another's perspective, enables us also to grasp something of the other's experience and to extend our moral engagement" (179). She argues that "this 'sympathetic imagination' is perhaps a necessary balance to the philosophical and scientific traditions of investigating animal-being" (179). Literature provides a voice for the animal other—it can provide a site in which the nonhuman animal might be imagined to respond and it can imagine an alien animal perspective through which the human animal might be observed. In doing so, literature performs the possibility ignored by the history of Western metaphysics which takes "no account of the fact that what they call 'animal' could *look at* them, and *address* them from down there, from a wholly other origin" (Derrida 13; emphases in original). Although, as Vint observes, "this voice of the animal in sf is, of course, a voice speaking *for* the animal" (179; emphasis in original), such imaginative exercises are still valued for forcing us to reconsider the question of the animal. Since that question revolves, to a large extent, around the issue of language, "to *write* as part of an effort to question the traditional hierarchy of species is," as Carol McGuirk observes, "not so much to risk as to court paradox" (282; emphasis in original). But that paradox is readily courted, to productive effect, by imaginative writers seeking to engage with the ethical question of the relation between human and nonhuman animals.

In this essay, I explore *Under The Skin*'s engagement with the role of language with regard to species differentiation, and analyze how its transspeciesed protagonist, Isserley, might be understood effectively in the context of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theories of becoming-animal. First I will show how Faber's novel addresses the standard division between the human and nonhuman animal: no language, no subjectivity; then how the novel moves beyond this to a more complex engagement with the question of the relations linking the human animal, the nonhuman animal, and language. Through a renaming of what the reader understands to be human beings as "vodsels" and the transference of this species name to the alien animal race of which the main character, Isserley, is a member, the novel demonstrates that the division between human and nonhuman animals is indeed a question of language. Yet it is a division *created by* language, not a distinction based on the possession of language. I will analyze how this deconstruction is performed through the novel's main formal device, the metamorphoses between the human and nonhuman animal, flora and fauna,

organic and machine, animate and inanimate, effected in the novel's imagery. In the second half of the essay I consider in what way Faber, and the reader, must now approach the question of the relation between the human and nonhuman animal if language (and in fact any of the other categories humanity has hitherto fixed upon) no longer marks the division between the two, even if, according to Derrida, irreducible difference remains. This leads to a sustained analysis of the main character in the novel, Isserley, in the light of Deleuze and Guattari's theories of becoming-animal, the anomalous, and becoming-molecular. I conclude that the novel engages in the *limitrophy*—Derrida's neologism—required to negotiate the abyssal limit between the human and nonhuman animal.

No language, no subjectivity? *Under the Skin* is a third-person narrative predominantly focalized through the protagonist Isserley, a member of a race of what the text calls "human beings" who come from an ecologically-ravaged, strictly class-divided planet. Members of Isserley's race, while called "human," actually resemble physically "a sort of cross between a cat, a dog, and a llama" (Hogan). The reader receives clues to this throughout the early stages of the text, as references are made to what the reader would consider Isserley and her co-workers' "animal" characteristics; yet the first full description of the physical appearance of a "human being" is delayed for over 100 pages, until Isserley first meets Amlis Vess, heir to the corporation for which she works:³

Like all of Isserley's race (except Isserley and Esswis, of course) he stood naked on all fours, his limbs exactly equal in length, all of them equally nimble. He also had a prehensile tail, which, if he needed his front hands free, he could use as another limb to balance on, tripod-style. His breast tapered seamlessly into a long neck, on which his head was positioned like a trophy. It came to three points: his long spearhead ears and his vulpine snout. His large eyes were perfectly round, positioned on the front of his face, which was covered in soft fur, like the rest of his body.

In all these things he was a normal, standard-issue human being... (110)

The reader gradually learns that in order to escape from a life of drudgery underground in the New Estates of her home world, Isserley has submitted to radical surgery that enables her to pass on Earth as what the reader understands to be a human being, a species renamed "vodsel" in the text. This surgery has included the removal of her tail and insertion of a metal rod into her spine so she can bear weight on only two legs, the removal of her sixth finger on each hand, and the replacement of her teats with false breasts modelled on those of a glamour model.

Forced to shave her fur regularly and dress in vodsel clothes, including internally modified shoes, Isserley is able to pass for a vodsel, a deception crucial to her professional success. For Isserley's job involves cruising the A9 in the Scottish Highlands on the lookout for prime male vodsel specimens—once she has offered one a lift, if she can determine through conversation that he will not be missed by family or friends, she flips the toggle for the "icpathua" needles embedded in the passenger seat. The injections anesthetize the vodsel long enough for Isserley to transport him back to the processing plant hidden beneath

the fields of the ostensibly innocent Ablach Farm. Fattened and then slaughtered, these male vodsels provide the source of the meat “voddissin,” a delicacy that costs ten thousand liss a fillet back on Isserley’s home planet—“for an ordinary person, a whole month’s worth of water and oxygen” (234). Apart from Isserley’s own experiences out on the Highland roads, the main event of the novel is a visit to Ablach Farm from the home planet by Amlis Vess—“the most beautiful man she [Isserley] had ever seen” (110)—son of the boss of Vess Incorporated, sole marketer of voddissin. Although hasty improvements are made to the farm’s appearance in anticipation of Vess’s arrival, it soon becomes clear that they are unlikely to impress this vegetarian animal-rights activist who, a stowaway on the incoming cargo ship, “had to see for [him]self what’s going on here” (229).

The key episode in the text with regard to the ethical relation between human and nonhuman animals and the question of language occurs when Vess persuades Isserley to accompany him down to the farm’s pens in order to explain something he has witnessed there. While Isserley is perfectly aware that the vodsels possess language, speech, and writing—and is nearly fluent in that language—this fact has been concealed from the consumers on her home world, and even from the men who work at the Scottish processing plant. When the vodsels arrive at the plant, the first alteration made to their bodies is the removal of their tongues. This serves to disguise their power of speech from Isserley’s co-workers by making it impossible for the vodsels to communicate verbally, with either the workers or each other, during the short time they reside on the farm. When Isserley is informed that Vess “goes and talks to the animals when the humans get sick of him” (159), she has a moment of panic: “Just for an instant Isserley forgot that the vodsels were tongueless, and was alarmed at the thought of them communicating with Amlis Vess, but she calmed down when the mouldy man laughed coarsely and added, ‘We says to him, “Do the animals talk back to you, then?”’” (159). The animals do not talk back, of course, since their physical capacity to do so has been removed, but, as it turns out, one of the newly arrived vodsels has nevertheless found a way of communicating with Vess:

The vodel bent over the earth, erasing his wild companion’s scuffed footprints from it with the edge of one hand. His empty scrotal sac, speckled with dried blood from his gelding, swung back and forth as he smoothed the soil and picked fragments of scattered straw out of it. Then he gathered a handful of long straws together, twisted and folded them to make a stiff wand, and began to draw in the dirt.... Isserley watched, disturbed, as the vodel scrawled a five-letter word with great deliberation, even going to the trouble of fashioning each letter upside down, so that it would appear the right-way-up for those on the other side of the mesh.

“No-one told me they had a language,” marvelled Amlis, too impressed, it seemed, to be angry. “My father always describes them as vegetables on legs.” (171)

Confirming the text’s interest in the idea of metamorphosis, this encounter explicitly recalls Book I of Ovid’s great poem of that title in which the beautiful Io is transformed into a white heifer by Jupiter in an attempt to hide his rape of her. Although, due to her species metamorphosis, Io can no longer speak, like the

vodsel in the pen she retains her command over language and reveals her true identity to her father by tracing letters in the ground:

Her tears rolled down; if only words would come,
 She'd speak her name, tell all, implore their aid.
 For words her hoof traced letters in the dust—
 I, O—sad tidings of her body's change. (20)⁴

The word the vodsel traces here is not its name, but MERCY, a word that Isserley realizes “by sheer chance ... was untranslatable into her own tongue; it was a concept that just didn't exist” (171). Isserley is desperate to conceal from Vess that the vodsels have a language—no doubt, the logic would imply, so as not to add fuel to his moral opposition to eating them. Vess is averse to eating them simply on the grounds that meat is “the body of a creature that lived and breathed just like you and me” (163); if he were to know that they had language—and therefore, according to the traditional equation, subjectivity—his case for their rights would be even stronger. Despite Isserley's refusal to admit that they have a language (““What do you *mean*, “What does it mean?”” she exclaimed testily. ‘It's a scratch mark that means something to vodsels, obviously. I couldn't tell you what it means’” [172; emphasis in original]), Vess is still insistent on the moral implications of the fact that “the meat you were eating a few minutes ago is the same meat that is trying to communicate with us down here” (173).

This scene in the pens demonstrates the functioning of the traditional division between the human and nonhuman animal—the possession and non-possession of language, respectively—and how it serves as a determinant of our ethical obligation to them, not least whether it is acceptable to kill and eat them. The fact that the vodsels' possession of language is such a closely guarded secret by Vess Industries implies that its revelation would cause the bottom to fall out of their business. Yet, in one of the many contradictions associated with her character, Isserley is both determined to keep the vodsels' possession of language a secret *and* insistent that this is not what marks their nonhumanity:

The thing about vodsels was, people who knew nothing whatsoever about them were apt to misunderstand them terribly. There was always the tendency to anthropomorphize. A vodsel might do something which resembled a human action; it might make a sound analogous with human distress, or make a gesture analogous with human supplication, and that made the ignorant observer jump to conclusions.

In the end, though, vodsels couldn't do any of the things that really defined a human being. They couldn't siuwil, they couldn't mesnishtil, they had no concept of slan. In their brutishness, they'd never evolved to use hunshur; their communities were so rudimentary that hississins did not exist; nor did these creatures seem to see any need for chail, or even chailsinn.

And when you looked into their glazed little eyes, you could understand why. If you were looking clearly, that is. (174)

In her foreword to *The Animal That Therefore I Am* (2008), Marie-Louise Mallet observes that the philosophical tradition Derrida is deconstructing defines “the animal, in an essentially negative way, as deprived of whatever is presumed to be ‘proper’ to the human” (Derrida x). Whereas Derrida names such things as

“speech, reason, experience of death, mourning, culture, institutions, technics, clothing, lying, pretense of pretense, covering of tracks, gift, laughter, crying, respect, etc.” (135), he emphasizes that “the list is necessarily without limit” (135). In a similar movement of comparative deprivation, Isserley adds to this infinite list, defining the vodsels as lacking *siuwil*, *mesnishtil*, *slan*, *hunshur*, *hississins*, *chail* and *chailsinn*, all valuable elements of her race’s “human” nature and culture. The dark irony here, of course, is that the reader does not know what any of these terms actually means.⁵ The emptiness of these specific signifiers serves as a metaphor for the emptiness of *any* signifier that “human” animals have used to distinguish themselves from nonhuman ones, and hence ethically justify their violence towards them. In light of this, Isserley’s hollow and illogical conclusion to this passage—“so that’s why it was better that Amlis Vess didn’t know that the vodsels had a language” (174)—resounds as an ethically weak justification for the industrial meat production industry in general, and her deadly role in it in particular.

While Isserley’s encounter with Vess shows the ethical functioning of the “no language, no subjectivity” model, the renaming of what the reader understands to be human beings as “vodsels,” like the transfer of the species name “human beings” to Isserley’s alien race, takes the text’s engagement with the question of language and the human and nonhuman animal beyond this simplistic formula. This act of species renaming is a crucial textual method of destabilizing the reassuring divisions that we, the readers, as a species draw between ourselves and the animals we eat, experiment upon, or otherwise do “justified” violence to. In the first instance, as Marion Gymnich and Sérgio Costa observe, the text’s intentionally deceptive opening—it is not at first evident that Isserley is not what we would consider to be human—exposes the reader’s “anthropocentric assumptions about literary characters” (85). The reader assumes that Isserley is a human being, like us, and that the narrative is being told from what we understand to be a human perspective.⁶ When it becomes clear that Isserley is indeed human, but only in the new sense of that term within the text, the reader realizes that from the outset she has been subject to an alien perspective on the vonsel species, a perspective that is the source of much of the social satire of contemporary culture evident in the novel.⁷

In the second instance, the linguistic inversion which names an alien animal species “human beings” and renames humankind “vodsels” sharpens the novel’s criticism of our meat industry. The description of the treatment of the vodsels who are “shaved, castrated, fattened, intestinally modified, chemically purified” (97) for a month while being kept in unlit underground pens littered with their own feces before being slaughtered is horrific enough; it is clear to the reader that we are being made to confront the procedures involved in putting cheap supplies of meat on supermarket shelves. But the fact that these procedures are being applied to us by a species that treats us no differently from how we treat nonhuman animals, and on no different grounds, causes us to confront in its full horror the possible inhumanity of such processes. As Faber comments in an interview with David Soyka, “the weird things we do in order to produce an endless supply of supermarket steak no longer bears much relation to farming as we like to imagine

it. It has entered the realm of Sci-fi horror.” In *Under the Skin*, the processes of the meat industry literally enter the realm of science fiction, with the added horror that in this text we are their subjects.

The third effect of Faber’s act of renaming is an exposure and destabilization of the linguistic process by which we create the distinction between the human and the nonhuman animal. Faber’s renaming demonstrates how discourse produces this distinction, drawing attention to how the difference between human animals and nonhuman animals is not one of possession *of* language, but one created *by* language. According to Derrida, this is a division created as early as the Book of Genesis, in which God commanded Adam to name the animals. In a subtle reading of this text, Derrida observes that “God destines the animals to be an experience of the power of man, *in order to see* the power of man in action, in order to see the power of man at work, in order to see man take power over all the other living things” (16; emphasis in original). That power is performed in the act of naming: “Dhormes: ‘He brings them to man *in order to see* what he will call them’” (Derrida 17; emphasis in original). All the names we give to animals serve the same function as that which Derrida observes in the word “the animal” itself: they are/it is “an appellation that men have instituted, a name they have given themselves the right and the authority to give to the living other” (23). In a defiant literary act of renaming, Faber removes this authority from humankind, linguistically placing us firmly back within the ranks of the animals over which we have, for so long, practiced linguistic and thus actual domination.

This heretical act of renaming is one of this secretive text’s many secrets, a phenomenon that interestingly accounts not only for the text’s contents but also for its narrative technique. In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1987), Deleuze and Guattari argue that “just as inseparable from the secret as its content [is] the way in which it imposes itself and spreads” (316). Having read *Under the Skin*, the reader knows that its various secrets have been revealed to her during the course of the text; but it is virtually impossible to identify precisely at which moments she knew or came to know what.⁸ There is more at stake here, formally, than a simple deferral of revelation. What the text performs is actually (to put to work Deleuze and Guattari’s pun) a *secretion*—a continual revelation of facts that are themselves secrets; facts that both reveal that there are textual secrets, yet at the same time continue to conceal the contents of those secrets. For example, why does Isserley so desire these men? What is she going to do with them? Why does she have to “dump” her first car, the Nissan, “after only a year” (5)? Why is the hitcher referred to as a “vodsel” (48)? What is “voddissin” (57)? What is “icpathua” (8)? A host of textual clues prompts these questions and leaves them unanswered, revealing but not telling the many secrets haunting the body of the text. In Deleuze and Guattari’s terms, “whatever the finalities or results, the secret has a way of spreading that is in turn shrouded in secrecy” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 316-17). The narrative technique in this text is thus that of “the secret as secretion” (317).

Metaphoric Metamorphoses. As Donna Haraway observes in *The Companion Species Manifesto* (2003), “species is about the corporeal join of the material and

the semiotic" (16). This connection between the body and language in the determination of species is acutely played out in *Under the Skin*. Although there are physical metamorphoses in *Under the Skin* (not least Isserley's surgical transformation into vodsel and the vodsels' intensive farming that reduces the individual human to a meaty carcass), the more significant metamorphoses are linguistic, not physical. The physical metamorphoses in the novel only deconstruct the species binary in combination with a far more radical and destabilizing aspect of the novel, one that raises the metamorphic stakes from the level of the individual and the physical to that of the species and the ontological. While the renaming of human beings as vodsels serves to expose the function of discourse in general in creating, and challenging, species differentiation, the text's rhetorical devices demonstrate how this can occur in one particular way—that is, in and through figurative language. For at every level of possible division—man/animal, flora/fauna, animate/inanimate, organic/inorganic—metamorphoses across those boundaries are effected by the text's abundant similes and metaphors. In this novel it is indeed the case, as Haraway observes, that "tropes are what make us want to look and need to listen for surprises that get us out of inherited boxes" (32).

In the first instance, the vodsels in the novel—human beings, to us readers—are described in what we consider distinctly animalistic terms, which compounds linguistically their animalistic treatment by the text's "human beings." The vodsels are forcibly transformed into animals not just by the humans' farming practices but by the very language in which they are described. In the opening pages, the hitchhikers are deprived of all the linguistic markers of what we would consider humanity: they are mere "specimens" (1), "fleshy biped[s]" (3; repeated 26). The first one we encounter with Isserley is described as "a hairy youngster ... ambling along the side of the narrow road" (5; "ambling" repeated 33). A little later, Isserley catches a glimpse of a distant lorry in her rear-view mirror, "its driver an insect head behind tinted glass" (21). In one of the local towns, renowned for its poverty, "females [are] giving birth too young" (25). In a characteristic paradox in her engagement with the vodsels (which I will examine further in the following section), Isserley has enough psychological insight into them to engage carefully each hitcher in appropriate conversation in order to find out what she needs to know about them; yet at the same time, she understands their interpersonal relationships in a crudely evolutionary sense in which happiness depends only on physical prowess: "strange how a specimen like him, well cared for, healthy, free to roam the world, and blessed with a perfection of form which would surely have allowed him to breed with a greater selection of females than average, could still be so miserable" (60). This figurative network that transforms the vodsels into animals continues throughout the text. One of the hitchers, desperate to return to his girlfriend at the appropriate hour unless she "skelps his bot," is described as having a "brown face ... bristly, wrinkled and scarred, with a mottled snout of a nose and two spectacularly bloodshot chimpanzee eyes" (77); later, he awakes suddenly in Isserley's car, "his bloodshot eyes and not-shiny snout leaping out of the dimness like startled wildlife" (81). When the monthling vodsels, just ripe for transportation, are released from their

pens in a misguided act of mercy on Amlis Vess' part, Isserley roams the farm with Eswiss, "straining for a glimpse of hairless pink animal" (97). When they find one of the vodsels in the wood, "eyes met across the forest floor: four large and human, two small and bestial" (99)—the bestial being, of course, the eyes of the vodel, which anticipates the description a little later of "the porcine eyes" (218) of the vodel Isserley witnesses being butchered. In a further instance of this linguistic animalization, as they return all the recaptured vodsels to the steading, Isserley sees "the swollen, bloody legs of the last vodel flop out like a pair of giant salmon" (108).

Of all their body parts, the vodsels' heads, faces, and facial features are most often linguistically transformed. This is a central aspect of their animalization if, as for Levinas, the face is essential in the ethical exchange: one of the escaped vodsels has a "shaved nub of a head nestled like a bud atop the disproportionately massive body" (100). One hitcher's "rough and blotchy" (120) skin makes it seem "as if the vodel's head had been lost at sea at some stage in its life, then cast ashore and weathered for years in the sun before finally being reunited with the body" (120). When Isserley visits the vodel pens with Vess, she observes that "their fat little heads were identical, swaying in a cluster like polyps of an anemone" (169). The face of the hitcher who sexually assaults Isserley is "a pink melon set atop a bulging stack of grimy yellow" (177); and the blood of the butchered vodel streams down his face, "swirling his eyelashes in the tide like sprigs of seaweed" (219). Given this imagery, it is not surprising that when Isserley glimpses a performance of *Hamlet* on television, she is unable to identify the skull he is holding as once belonging to a vodel. She describes it as "a small white sculpture ... a three-dimensional version of the danger symbol displayed on Ablach's main steading" (144), yet she is unable to connect this abstract, inanimate symbol with the flesh and blood that she captures every day.

It is significant that the third-person narrative of the novel is predominantly focalized through Isserley, her thoughts and feelings. It is therefore possible to interpret this imagery as part of Isserley's own psychological battle to "dehumanize" the vodsels in order to justify her role in killing them. Not only must she deny them language, which would (and does) deanimalize them for Amlis Vess, but she must also animalize them in her own language about them. In this vein, her imagery goes even further and in fact deanimates the vodsels, depriving them of any "living" status at all. For example, very early in the novel she describes how "she would be driving along as the sun rose fully, watching the distant farmhouses turn golden, when something much nearer to her, drably shaded, would metamorphose suddenly from a tree-branch or a tangle of debris into a fleshy biped with its arm extended" (2-3). Distracted from her work by the "allure of beauty" of the landscape around her, Isserley might sometimes sweep by, "narrowly missing the tip of the hitcher's hand, as if the fingers might have been snapped off, twig-like, had they grown just a few centimetres longer" (3). Later, Isserley observes "a couple of tubby youths with crewcut heads and plastic knapsacks, splashing in a gutter near the Invergordon underpass" (24):

Their rain-soaked heads looked like a couple of peeled potatoes, each with a little plat of brown sauce on top; their hands seemed gloved in bright green foil: the

wrappers of crisp packets. In her rear view mirror, Isserley had watched their waddling bodies recede to coloured blobs finally swallowed up in the grey soup of the rain. (24-25)

One hitcher has a face littered with scars "like imperfectly erased graffiti" (29); another seems to have an ontological status equal to that of his car, in Isserley's estimation: "Both hitcher and car seemed upright and in one piece, although the one was making exaggerated gestures to draw attention to the other" (76). Such imagery continues throughout the novel, with vodsels being compared to, among other things, "cartoon characters" (77), "a cartoon tomcat in the shadow of a falling bomb" (78), "a garish fibreglass tourist attraction" (105), "massive effigies made of candlefat, unevenly melted from their hairy wicks" (114), "a piece of heavy farm machinery" (175), "an experimental traffic fixture" (175), "a sack of potatoes" (209), and "a felled tree" (217).

The animalization and deanimation of the vodsels in the text's imagery transforms them from creatures with whom Isserley would have to enter into some kind of ethical relationship to objects outside the necessity of such an exchange. This fabricated exclusion is emphasized further by another effect of the imagery, the animation of the inanimate. While the vodsels are drained of life, cars, road networks, tractors, steering wheels, factories, icpathua needles, machines, shower nozzles, windows, and chocolates are all imbued with an uncanny vitality.⁹ Isserley seems strangely capable of more empathy with, and care of, her car, than with the vodsels. She is even willing to countenance the possibility that a car could communicate, despite perversely denying this right to the vodsels whose language she speaks:

She became aware of a rattle somewhere above the wheel on the passenger side. She listened to it, holding her breath, wondering what it was trying to tell her in its quaint foreign language. Was the rattle a plea for help? A momentary grumble? A friendly warning? She listened some more, trying to imagine how a car might make itself understood. (5)

As Isserley's personality begins to change during the course of the story, however, the effect of the text's imagery becomes more complex. Whereas the deanimation of the vodsels functions as a strategy of othering, the same deanimation appears in Isserley's descriptions of Amlis Vess, to different effect. Vess is indeed other to Isserley, whose physical alteration has rendered her other to her own species, and to the males at the plant because of his class and consequent physical beauty: "in all these things he was a normal, standard-issue human being, no different from the workman standing behind him, watching him nervously. But he *was* different" (110; emphasis in original). At the same time, the text evokes this otherness as attractive and seductive. Just as one of the nicer hitchhikers—himself a foreigner from Germany—thinks that Isserley's eyes are "startlingly beautiful ... glowing like ... like the illuminated microscope slides of some exotic bacterial culture" (43), so Vess is described in terms neither human nor animal: "the fur on his throat rearranged itself like wheat in the wind" (228); his tongue "was red and clean as the petal of an anemone flower" (236). As it becomes clear that Vess reciprocates Isserley's attraction, at least to some extent,

he describes how, “in the moonlight, her damp eyelids were silvery and intricately patterned, like the leaf he had admired in the steading” (243). Significantly, while the lower-class workers are deanimated by comparisons to machines—“all these men were falling apart, hair by hair and tooth by tooth, like over-used pieces of equipment, like tools bought cheap for a job that would outlast them” (256)—the deanimating imagery of Isserley and Vess is drawn from the natural world, the beautiful and unspoiled planet Earth that offers such a stark contrast to the environmental desolation of their homeland. While such natural comparisons in relation to the vodsel are deeply disturbing—“its empty scrotal sac dangled like a pale oak leaf under its dark acorn of a penis” (100)—in relation to Isserley they identify her with the natural world, for the experience of which she has undergone her physical metamorphosis. While lying in the bath, her breast implants may remind her “of rocks in the ocean, revealed by the tide. Stones on her chest, pulling her down” (250), but it is only because of those implants that she knows what rocks in the ocean look like at all.

Becoming-animal. In the first half of the novel, Isserley is determined to establish and maintain her identity through a logic of being. Desperate to preserve her distinctness from vodsel, Isserley insists to Vess, “I’m a human being, not a vodsel” (173). Her fear of meeting Vess is rooted in a terror that he will not recognize her for what she is: “He’d be expecting to see a human being, and he would see a hideous animal instead. It was that moment of ... of the sickening opposite of recognition that she just couldn’t cope with” (75). Isserley needs to define herself by what she is not, but the attempt to do so is constantly challenged by the surgical modifications made to her body, which cause her to inhabit physically the limit between human and vodsel, to move backwards and forwards across it, to fold this limit upon itself: “It was as if, in too profound a darkness, she could not be sure what sort of creature she was” (144). She isolates herself from her fellow workers in order to conceal how the physical changes wrought to her body cause her to live like a vodsel. She is furious with herself when, in a moment of weakness, she reveals details such as her need, now, to sleep on a bed: “Tired and vulnerable, she’d lost concentration and let slip that little detail about going to her bed. No doubt Ensel would relish that, share it with the other men, this titillating proof of her subhumanity” (92). But at the same time that her body has been pushed over into the “animality” of the vodsel, it is also constantly seeking to return to its original “humanity.” When she gets out of bed she stumbles, trying to steady herself with a tail that is no longer there; if she does not shave regularly, her luscious fur begins to return:

Even at a glance, she found it difficult to believe how much she had let herself go. It seemed like only a few days ago that she’d last done what was necessary to push herself across the dividing line into bestiality; it must have been much longer ago than that.... [H]er fur was growing back everywhere except in the places that were so severely scarred or artificial that nothing could grow there. She looked almost human. (250)

Isserley’s need rigorously to define herself as what she understands to be a human, not an animal, is crucial to her psychological ability to continue with her

work. A conviction of her difference from them is all that enables her to remain impervious to the plight of the vodseles she captures. Such is Isserley's psychological determination in this respect that it leads to a virtually pathological inability to recognize their suffering: covered in mud, blood, and shit, trying to heave the carcass of a monthling vodsel over a barbed wire fence, "all the while blood ... leaking copiously onto the concrete path from the blasted head, whose shattered jaw dangled loose like a gibbery hinge of gore" (103), Isserley reflects merely on the beauty of the word "Seattle," the origin, she recalls, of the vodsel's tattoos—"A beautiful word, she'd thought then, and she thought so again now" (103). Isserley is able to maintain such detachment due to a character trait she has had since her youth on her home planet: "her own emotions hid from her. She'd always been like that, even back home—even when she was a kid. Men had always said they couldn't figure her out, but she couldn't figure herself out, either, and had to look for clues like anyone else" (39): "She could glimpse her feelings, but only out of the corner of her eye, like distant headlights reflected in a side mirror. Only by not looking for them directly did she have any chance of spotting them" (39). Isserley is eventually forced to confront her feelings, if only indirectly, through the central encounter of the novel, in which she is sexually assaulted and barely escapes being raped by one of the hitchers. In the language and theory of Deleuze and Guattari, this rapist can be understood as the Anomalous—"the Thing which arrives and passes at the edge, which is linear yet multiple, 'teeming, seething, swelling, foaming, spreading like an infectious disease, this nameless horror'" (*A Thousand Plateaus* 270, quoting H.P. Lovecraft)—in relation to which, in an alliance of hate with which, Isserley enters into a becoming-animal.

In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari announce their belief "in the existence of very special becomings-animal traversing human beings and sweeping them away, affecting the animal no less than the human" (261). Alongside the existing models of "sacrifice and series, totem institution and structure," they suggest that "there is still room for something else, something more secret, more subterranean: *the sorcerer* and becomings (expressed in tales instead of myths or rites)" (262; emphasis in original). Performing Derrida's suggestion that "thinking concerning the animal, if there is such a thing, derives from poetry," Deleuze and Guattari locate becomings-animal in *tales*, not philosophy, at the same time as their own prose elaborating the concept verges on the lyrical. In these pages, indeed, we have an example of Derrida's idea of "poetic thinking":

A becoming is not a correspondence between relations. But neither is it a resemblance, an imitation, or, at the limit, an identification. The whole structuralist critique of the series seems irrefutable. To become is not to progress or regress along a series. Above all, becoming does not occur in the imagination, even when the imagination reaches the highest cosmic or dynamic level, as in Jung or Bachelard. Becomings-animal are neither dreams nor phantasies. They are perfectly real. But which reality is at issue here? For if becoming animal does not consist in playing animal or imitating animal, it is clear that the human being does not "really" become an animal any more than the animal "really" becomes

something else. Becoming produces nothing other than itself. We fall into a false alternative if we say that you either imitate or you are. What is real is the becoming itself, the block of becoming, not the supposedly fixed terms through which that which becomes passes. Becoming can and should be qualified as becoming-animal even in the absence of a term that would be the animal become. The becoming-animal of the human being is real even if the animal the human being becomes is not; and the becoming-other of the animal is real, even if that something other it becomes is not. This is the point to clarify: that a becoming lacks a subject distinct from itself; but also that it has no term, since its term in turn exists only as taken up in another becoming of which it is the subject, and which coexists, forms a block, with the first. (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 268)

The central point here is the difference between becoming-animal and metamorphosis: in metamorphosis, there is a transformation (the linguistic root of metaphor and metamorphosis) from one being to another; in becoming-animal, there is a shift from a logic of being to a logic of becoming, a shift from an identity based upon what one is (and therefore also upon what one is not) to an identity in process, defined only in and through repeated moments of relationality—in this instance, with the animal other.¹⁰

This becoming-animal is effected by an encounter with what Deleuze and Guattari call the Anomalous. In addition to the significance of the pack in becoming-animal, they also insist on a seemingly opposite second principle: “wherever there is multiplicity, you will also find an exceptional individual, and it is with that individual that an alliance must be made in order to become-animal” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 268). “It is always with the Anomalous,” they argue, “that one enters into an alliance to become-animal” (269). At the same time, however, they insist that the Anomalous is neither an individual nor a species, but “a phenomenon of bordering” (270). Isserley encounters the Anomalous in the figure of the rapist—a borderline figure—an encounter that forces her to confront her own bordering status. This initiates a becoming-animal that destroys Isserley’s ability to distance herself from the vodsels, since she is now defined as and in her relationship with them. This thereby makes for a shift in her character in the second half of the novel. Before the assault, Isserley has exhibited an empathy with non-vodsel animals, such as sheep and rabbits: given their physical resemblance to the text’s human beings, Isserley cannot believe the former cannot talk; she considers the latter to be “winsome little creatures” (90). She also empathizes with a “poor insect creature” (146) in a TV film. She has even, once, exhibited some kindness towards the vodsels—she drops one man off at his girlfriend’s, allowing him to sleep all the way (87)—although this act of kindness causes an immediate rupture in her carefully preserved identity: after dropping him off, she remains in her car and weeps, “keening softly in her own language” (88). It is only after the attack, however (now that she is becoming-animal, now that her identity is defined in relationality with the other, not in opposition to it), that her division between herself and the vodsels breaks down. As a result, so too does her ability to distance herself ethically from them.

The attack has demonstrated that the vodsels can affect Isserley just as much as she can affect them, that there is in fact a two-way exchange here, an ethical relationship. This prompts two new and conflicting responses in Isserley with regard to the vodsels: one, hostility and a sexualized desire for revenge; the other, empathy. Both of these emotional responses to the vodsels are of the kind that Isserley has previously repressed. The former is manifest when Isserley returns to the farm with her first hitcher since the attack. Isserley breaks her usual pattern of simply delivering the vodsel to the door of the steading and then returning to her cottage. She bewilders the men by deciding to come with them to the processing hall: "I just want to see what happens" (209). What Isserley wants, however, is to watch the vodsel suffer as recompense for her own suffering at the hands of the would-be rapist. Such a desire, while obviously a negative one, shows a new recognition in Isserley that the vodsels are capable of both inflicting and suffering pain. This recognition transgresses the precarious dissociation between herself and vodsels that has enabled her to perform her job until now. Recalling the imagery of the opening of the novel, this desire is also portrayed as sexual: Isserley has trouble controlling her breathing while watching the new vodsel being prepared for the pens and she is frustrated with the surgical precision and speed of the operation—"How could it be over so soon! And with so little violence, so little ... drama?... She had a need for release raging inside her, swollen to explosion point" (215). When watching the operations on the new vodsel does not provide this release, she persuades Unser, the butcher, to process one last monthling. As his throat is cut and "a jet of blood gushed out, steaming hot and startlingly red against the silvery trough" (219), Isserley achieves the orgasmic release of revenge she has been seeking: "'Yes!' screamed Isserley involuntarily. 'Yes!'" (219).

Isserley's emotional response violates the detachment required to treat the vodsels as animals, shocking and appalling her fellow workers: expelling her from the processing hall, Unshur admonishes her for her ethical breach—"We are doing a job here,' the Chief Processor reminded her sternly. 'Feelings don't enter into it'" (219). But Isserley's encounter with the rapist *has* brought feelings into it, and although they are manifest here as a desire for violent revenge, it soon becomes clear that the real threat of these emerging feelings is that they also reveal a far more destabilizing empathy. When she captures her first vodsel after the attack, "two tears fell out of her eyes, onto the hitcher's jeans. She frowned, unable to account for it" (207). In keeping with her disconnection from her own feelings, she drives "directly back to Ablach Farm, trying to fathom, all the way there, what could possibly be wrong" (207). Isserley tentatively identifies the source of the trouble as the assault, but the becoming-animal it has effected is revealed most clearly in language, continuing the predominant technique of this text:

Of course the events of yesterday ... or was it the day before?... She wasn't exactly sure how long she had spent on the jetty afterwards ... but anyway, those events ... well, they *had* upset her, there was no denying that. But it was all in the past now. Water under the bridge, as the vodsels ... as she'd heard said. (207; emphasis in original)

Isserley's linguistic slip and self-correction evidences a becoming-animal through language, through an implicit admission that the vodsels possess it, and through a repetition of its idioms in her own thoughts. This is the second linguistic slip of this kind to occur after the assault, the first containing an even more significant indicator of her becoming-animal. In the first linguistic slip, Isserley observes the beach with the "bony rocks pimpled with those little molluscs that people—that vodsels—collected. *Whelks*. That was the word. *Whelks*" (192). This is the first and only time that the vodsels attain the status of "people" in the language of the text, demonstrating, as Deleuze and Guattari state, that becoming-animal affects the animal no less than the human.

Evidence of Isserley's becoming-animal permeates the remainder of the text. The imagery shifts to begin to identify Isserley with the vodsels: the reader finds a description of "the waving seaweed of her hair" (248) which recalls the earlier description of the butchered vodsel's eyelashes as seaweed. She begins to try to view herself from the perspective of another species, if only in terms of her physical appearance: "she tried to see herself as a vodsel might" (250). And she begins to insist on an identity that is not determined by belonging to one species or another: "She wasn't anybody's kind—the sooner he understood that, the better it would be for both of them" (258). The most significant encounter in this second half is that with another Anomalous figure, the vodsel murderer, as weary with his life of killing as she is. Isserley feels a strange affinity with this vodsel; she cannot read him as she normally reads the hitchers, just as she cannot read herself: "She'd never had anyone quite like him before. She wondered, alarmingly, if she liked him" (267). The language of the text brings them together: "They sat in silence for a while, as the fresh air blew in. Isserley breathed deeply, and so did the vodsel. He seemed to be struggling with something, just as she was" (270). In the end, he decides to have mercy on her and let her go; she also decides to have mercy on him, in a way, by ending his painful life: "'I'm sorry,' she whispered. 'I'm sorry'" (271).

Isserley's becoming-animal even extends beyond the vodsels to other species. After capturing the vodsel she calls Pennington Studios, Isserley dreams of his pet dog locked in his van and subsequently goes to rescue it. In the dream that prompts her to do so, Isserley undergoes a physical metamorphosis into the dog:

at the beginning it was unmistakably Isserley, being led down into the bowels of the earth. But by the end she seemed to have changed shape, size and species. And in those lost anxious seconds before waking, the dream hadn't been about a human being anymore, but a dog, trapped inside a vehicle in the middle of nowhere. Her master wasn't coming back, and she was going to die. (275)

This is not a becoming-animal—since Deleuze and Guattari insist that that is real and does not take place in dreams—but a dream metamorphosis that echoes, shadows, or parallels the real becoming-animal. Although Isserley attempts to reason herself out of her concern for the dog, it seems that—now her consciousness has been opened up to becoming-animal, to existing in relationality with the animal-other—this extends to the entire animal world, not just the vodsels. She is fearful, for instance, of polluting the loch in which she bathes with

shampoo, evidencing an empathetic concern for "the things" that live in it (287). She even considers rescuing Pennington Studios from the steading, "but of course it was too late. Pennington would have had his tongue and balls removed last night. He hadn't much wanted to live anyway, and he was hardly likely to have changed his mind by now. He was better left alone" (279).

Finally, Isserley's becoming-animal determines the ending of the novel. Awakened from the pathological denial that sustained her work, Isserley decides to leave her job and Ablach farm and try to make her own way in the vodsels world: "She could disappear into the trees like a pheasant" (285). In this sense, Isserley's becoming-animal is indeed "accompanied, at its origin as in its undertaking, by a rupture with the central institutions that have established themselves or seek to become established" (Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus* 273). For Isserley, this means a rupture with her employer, Vess Incorporated. Isserley's becoming-animal is also one which, as Deleuze and Guattari elaborate in *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature* (1986), "the animal proposes to the human by indicating ways-out or means of escape that the human would never have thought of by himself" (35). Becoming-animal is "an ensemble of states, each distinct from the other, grafted onto the man insofar as he is searching for a way out. It is a creative line of escape that says nothing other than what it is" (36). Isserley does escape, for a short time, but the tragic inevitability of the text is that, as with Kafka's Gregor, Isserley's becoming-animal turns into a becoming-dead. Trapped in her car after an accident, bleeding to death, Isserley is attended to by the driver of another car. Becoming-animal here passes through a becoming-woman, as a female vodsels is repeatedly referred to as a "woman" for the first time in the novel (eleven times in pages 294-95), and once, significantly, as "the other woman" (294). Isserley becomes-vodsels in a literal sense at this moment, as the woman wraps her in the anorak that she has always used to disguise her stung hitches. But the text does not end here. Rather, it ends with Isserley's suicide as she presses the button for the "aviir" (295) installed in the car's engine:

The aviir would blow her car, herself, and a generous scoop of earth into the smallest conceivable particles....

And she? Where would she go?

The atoms that had been herself would mingle with the oxygen and nitrogen in the air. Instead of ending up buried in the ground, she would become part of the sky: that was the way to look at it. Her invisible remains would combine, over time, with all the wonders under the sun. When it snowed, she would be part of it, falling softly to earth, rising up again with the snow's evaporation. When it rained, she would be there in the spectral arch that spanned from firth to ground. She would help to wreath the fields in mists, and yet would always be transparent to the stars. She would live forever. All it took was the courage to press one button, and the faith that the connection had not been broken.

She reached forward a trembling hand.

"Here I come," she said. (296)

Isserley's becoming-animal leads not just to a becoming-woman but to a becoming-molecular and a becoming-imperceptible. Isserley wishes to become-

imperceptible in the vodel world; failing that, she becomes-imperceptible in the cosmic sense, enacting that “rushing toward” becoming-imperceptible that Deleuze and Guattari identify as “the immanent end of becoming, its cosmic formula” (*A Thousand Plateaus* 307-308): “She should have known from the beginning that it would end like this” (249).¹¹

Conclusion. In *Zoontologies*, Wolfe argues that

the humanities are ... now struggling to catch up with a radical revaluation of the status of nonhuman animals that has taken place in society at large. A veritable explosion of work in areas such as cognitive ethology and field ecology has called into question our ability to use the old saws of anthropocentrism (language, tool use, the inheritance of cultural behaviours, and so on) to separate ourselves once and for all from animals, as experiments in language and cognition with great apes and marine mammals, and field studies of extremely complex social and cultural behaviours in wild animals such as apes, wolves, and elephants, have more or less permanently eroded the tidy divisions between human and nonhuman. And this, in turn, has led to a broad reopening of the question of the ethical status of animals in relation to the human—an event whose importance is named but not really captured by the term *animal rights*. (xi-xii; emphases in original)

Under the Skin provides one example of the humanities catching up with research in the sciences in this respect in its exploration of the powerful role of language in creating a (false) ontological distinction between human and nonhuman animals. The question remains, philosophically, however, where do the humanities go from here? Derrida suggests that what must happen is a turn to “the logic of the limit” that would entail a concern with “a properly *transgressal* if not transgressive experience of *limitrophy*” (29; emphases in original):

Limitrophy is therefore my subject. Not just because it will concern what sprouts or grows at the limit, around the limit, by maintaining the limit, but also what *feeds the limit*, generates it, raises it, and complicates it. Everything I’ll say will consist, certainly not in effacing the limit, but in multiplying its figures, in complicating, thickening, delinearizing, folding, and dividing the line precisely by making it increase and multiply. (Derrida 29; emphases in original)

Significantly, *limitrophy* does not consist in questioning whether there is a difference, “rupture or abyss between those who say ‘we men,’ ‘I, a human,’ and ... what he *calls* the animal or animals” (30; emphasis in original): “I shan’t for a single moment venture to contest that thesis” (30), says Derrida. Rather, *given that thesis*, the challenge is to negotiate the dividing line between the two, to pay attention to “the number, form, sense, or structure, the foliated consistency, of this abyssal limit, these edges, this plural and repeatedly folded frontier” (30). *Under the Skin* engages in such a *limitrophy* not only in its linguistic act of renaming and in its imagery, but also in the character of Isserley, who, as we have seen, both negotiates and inhabits the abyssal limit between the human and the nonhuman animal.

NOTES

1. For Faber’s rejection of this generic status for marketing reasons, see his comments in interviews with Ron Hogan and David Soyka. Further comments in the interview with

Hogan and in an interview with Jill Adams reveal that Faber's rejection of sf is also based on a limited understanding of the genre's complexity, merely reducing it to the tropes of one of its subgenres, space opera. The novel's non-genre marketing has been successful in downplaying its generic affinity with sf, leading reviewers repeatedly to emphasize its "hybrid" status. See, for instance, comments by Abrams, Fidel, Flood, and Kane. Harger-Grinling and Jordaan also embrace this idea of the text's hybridity, while acknowledging that "the elements of science fiction are omnipresent and not to be ignored" (246). Claims for the novel's hybridity might be reinforced by the hybridity of Faber's oeuvre as a whole, which is more "slipstream" than "mainstream"; as Jules Smith summarizes, "his books are difficult to classify; they vary from novella length to magnum opus, and can be read as unusual hybrid thrillers, gothic tales with touches of romance, horror, the ghost story, and even science fiction"—but, interestingly, even Faber's most "realist" novel, *The Crimson Petal and the White* (2002), is framed as sf, with the reader constructed and addressed as a time traveler from another age.

2. Despite Faber's avowed dislike of television, *Under the Skin* also recalls an episode of the Showtime sf series *The Outer Limits* entitled "The Quality of Mercy." The uncanny similarities between the two texts begin with the episode's title, given *Under the Skin*'s concern with this same topic, and extend to the use of a species-disguised female to seduce and entrap a human male, as well as the narrative shock of the discovery of the episode's secret. *Under the Skin* might also be read alongside a host of recent works of feminist sf concerned specifically with women transformed into animals or animals transformed into women. Such a reading would place more emphasis on the sexual politics of the novel than I have chosen to do. For a survey of such texts, see Tuttle.

3. In the early stages of the novel, reference is made to Ensel's "paws" (32) and "snout" (99) and Isserley's "claw" (38), "tailbone" (40), "powerful claws" (68), and "big satiny lids" (77). She also has an "animal" metabolism: "after a whole night of lying still and letting nature take its course, her body had attained a simmering circulation that would persist until she'd exercise herself into diurnal metabolism. In the meantime, she was as warm as a snow goose" (50). Reference is also made to the unnaturalness of having to walk on two legs: "instead, here she was, free to wander in an unbounded wilderness swirling with awesome surpluses of air and water. And all she had to do in return, when it came right down to essentials, was walk on two legs. Of course that wasn't all she'd had to do" (65). The number of weight-bearing legs as the significant indicator of species difference is perhaps the text's clearest intertextual connection with George Orwell's *Animal Farm* (1945). For a discussion of further connections between the two texts, see Harger-Grinling and Jordaan.

4. For a brief discussion of *Under the Skin* in the context of an analysis of the literary motif of human-animal metamorphosis and its functions in contemporary fiction, see Gymnich and Costa.

5. Only one of these words exists in the English language prior to *Under the Skin*: "slan" is the title of A.E. van Vogt's 1946 sf novel, as well as the name of the fictional race of superbeings featured in the story, who are capable, not least, of telepathy. No English or other language source has been found for any of the other words in Isserley's list. One wonders, given Faber's disavowal of any sf influence, whether the allusion to *Slan* was purely accidental. Faber's deployment of these neologisms follows a common sf practice, of course, on which see Csicsery-Ronay, Jr. (13-46).

6. This human perspective causes the reader to interpret Isserley's intentions towards her targets as sexual, rather than sinister, an interpretation encouraged by the repeated sexual imagery of the early stages of the text. For example, in the opening paragraph, Isserley uses the language of assessment and objectification that is usually reserved, in our

sexual politics, for men observing women: "Isserley always drove straight past a hitchhiker when she first saw him, to give herself time to size him up. She was looking for big muscles: a hunk on legs. Puny, scrawny specimens were no use to her" (1). When she imagines her future actions, these are portrayed as a sexual fantasy: "She tried to project herself forward in time, visualizing herself already parked somewhere with a hunky young hitchhiker sitting next to her; she imagined herself breathing heavily against him as she smoothed his hair and grasped him round the waist to ease him into position" (7). This deliberately misleading sexualized opening both increases the shock when Isserley's true intentions are revealed, and is part of the text's broader concern with sexual politics and male-female relations.

7. Satirical comment on our human culture is made in a number of ways in the text: by a dystopian reflection of our possible future in the glimpses we get of Isserley's ravaged home planet and inequitable society, as well as in Isserley's direct reflections on the vodsel species in her comments, for instance, on our television programs (51; 144-46) and on unemployment:

Unemployed vodsels were always a good risk. Although to Isserley they looked just as fit as vodsels who had jobs, she'd found that they were often cast out from their society, isolated and vulnerable. And, once exiled, they seemed to spend the rest of their lives skulking at the peripheries of the herd, straining for a glimpse of the high-ranking males and nubile females they yearned to befriend but could never approach for fear of swift and savage punishment. In a way, the vodsel community itself seemed to be selecting those of its members it was content to have culled. (175)

8. A similar readerly experience is caused by another contemporary British sf novel marketed as a mainstream text, Kazuo Ishiguro's *Never Let Me Go* (2005). The narrative technique of secretion identified here might also usefully describe the "told and not told" (Ishiguro 79, 81) dynamic at play in the revelation of information to the reader, and to Kathy H and the other Hailsham students, in Ishiguro's text.

9. See, for instance, the following examples: "Isserley, too, often ventured out at hours of such prehistoric stillness that her vehicle might have been the first ever" (2); cars are described as "like one sheep following another on a narrow path" (2); the road network is alive, evolving, a throbbing body of arteries and capillaries—"this being an arterial road, she must be alert to all the little capillary paths joining it. Only a few of the junctions were clearly signposted, as if singled out for this distinction by natural selection; the rest were camouflaged by trees" (2); "Ignoring junctions was not a good idea, even though Isserley had the right of way: any one of them could be spring-loaded with an impatiently struggling tractor which, if it leapt into her path, would hardly suffer for its mistake, while she would be strewn across the bitumen" (2); "The red Corolla handled swiftly and could be temperamental. No doubt it wanted to be a good car, but it had its problems" (5). Further examples of the animation or animalization of the inanimate can be found throughout the novel.

10. Deleuze and Guattari's becoming-animal can be seen to inhabit Haraway's emphasis on relationality in *The Companion Species Manifesto*, in which she is concerned with "how to live ethically in these mortal, finite flows that are about heterogeneous relationship—and not about 'man'" (24).

11. For an engaging use of Deleuze and Guattari's theory of becoming in relation to contemporary sf texts, both novels and films, see Rosi Braidotti. Braidotti's critique of "the sexually undifferentiated structure of Deleuze's notion of becoming" (67) offers a way into thinking about the feminist implications of *Under the Skin* and what is at stake (and at play) in its protagonist's being female. In such a reading, *Under the Skin* should be placed in the context of "contemporary science fiction texts [that] trace numerous lines

of affinity and coextensivity between women and animals or insects" (71). Braidotti wishes to read these texts together "as a block of becomings" (71). She sees them as a variation on the paradigm of "woman = monster/alien other," suggested by [Sarah] Lefanu.... They are assimilated within the general category of "difference," which facilitates deep empathy between women and aliens and also favours exchanges and mutual influences. This points in the direction of a very genderized approach to the different processes of becoming and the metamorphoses that mark science fiction. (71-72)

Braidotti's argument is that, in such texts, the same causes produce different effects when it comes to the different becomings of women and men: "the asymmetry Deleuze acknowledges in the respective starting positions of the majority and the minorities results in asymmetrical, not in common processes of becoming" (77).

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ABSTRACT

This essay reads Michel Faber's debut novel *Under the Skin* (2000) in the context of contemporary philosophical and literary-critical debates about the ethical relation between human and nonhuman animals. It argues that Faber's text engages with, but deconstructs, the traditional division of "no language, no subjectivity" by a heretical act of renaming human beings as "vodseles," and by an extensive process of figurative transformation. The paper then proceeds to a sustained analysis of the main character in the novel, Isserley, in the light of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's theories of becoming-animal, the anomalous, and becoming-molecular. The paper concludes that the novel engages in the *limitrophy*—Derrida's neologism—required to negotiate the abyssal limit between the human and nonhuman animal.